



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

Bell, B ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6436-2041> (2013)
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Barbara Bell

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The Olympics in our Sporting Life?

I'm from an era with personal experience of Olympics going back to grainy black and white images from Tokyo, Mexico and Munich - watching Mary Rand, Anne Packer and Mary Peters – meant Athletics became my first sporting love. As a school girl I expanded my sporting horizons to any other sports I could get access to at school. My personal sporting career never, despite my early enthusiasm, went beyond the dizzy heights of County and University representation, but instead led to a lifelong fascination with sport as both a subject and career. After graduating from a leading sporting University my professional career subsequently included 10 years working in community sport and thereafter lecturing and researching in sport studies and development. So, I have been personally and professionally enthralled by the Olympics for most of my life, as I suspect, have my contemporaries.

Underpinning our relationship to the Olympics is our assumption of role and purpose of sport and its impacts and our beliefs about the Olympic movement, which, until this summer, was based on a mediated experience, at arms length or detached from the 'reality' of the event, for the vast majority of the British public and many academics like myself. It's hard not to align with the overarching message of Olympism, despite any reservations about the IOC, if you believe ultimately that sport is a 'good thing' and can see the power of the sporting mega event to harness the inspirational performances of elite athletes for potential impacts on 'grass roots' sport and beyond. But for the majority, our engagement with sport is very detached from the Games themselves. London hosting the event in 2012 offered the chance for a much more personal experience of the Olympic 'magic' for millions, including myself.

Like thousands of others, I was determined that 2012 was going to offer me the chance, not just to see this event 'first hand' in a once in a lifetime experience, but to become part of it, as a volunteer. After being a Volunteer in the Velodrome at the Manchester Commonwealth Games in 2002, I was determined to be a part of the London Olympics, in whatever way I could. I applied for and was successful in gaining Games Maker status in 2011, so I thought I would be part of the volunteer army in London, but due to various delays, poor communication from LOCOG and missed chances, I never made it. Instead I withdrew from the Games Maker process around April 2012, while still awaiting my confirmed role allocation, so managed to join the last minute scramble for late released tickets and became a local Torch Relay volunteer. I had also signed up to 'Sportmakers',¹ in an attempt to get inside the Olympic experience as part of a national programme. This actually resulted in me getting tickets for the Paralympics and inside the stadium, as a reward for completing 10 hours of logged 'activity'.

Also, over the past 5 years, I have also carried out personal and collaborative research involved in Legacy planning and creation and seen first-hand the work in schools, local authorities clubs and colleges aiming to maximise the benefits of the Olympic and Paralympic Games to local communities across the country. Thus, ever since the announcement was made in 2005, I've embraced the popular enthusiasm for a 'home games' with being part of a sometimes cynical and always critical academic community – which has both tested and challenged a lot of the rhetoric coming from Government and LOCOG.

Pre Olympic expectation and the rhetoric of sporting legacy

The expectation that the Olympics would be the catalyst to inspire people to become more active and thus contribute to the health and social objectives of the country was made clear in announcements even before the bid was submitted as the Government justified their investment in supporting the bid². Boosts were expected in grass roots sport and in general fitness and activity levels – despite the DCMS/Strategy Units conclusions in 2002 that major events were really only useful to health due to the 'feelgood factor' they promoted. This also assumed that gains in participation and activity would be possible only be concerted efforts across government, and all sectors of a modernised sporting landscape, but reiterated the assumed link between elite success and the growth of sport in a form of 'trickle down' effect and positive feedback loop. This assumed that more successful athletes inspired more participation, from which more successful athletes would emerge, and that more participation was a good thing as an active population was more healthy. However, as MORI concluded that Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games had not had a major impact on sport participation, this had clearly not been demonstrated as an outcome from all major events.³

The Labour government clearly committed to sporting legacy through its influence on the spending of Lottery money through their Non-Departmental Bodies – Sport England and UK Sport for community sport and elite sport respectively. However, it wasn't until 2008 when the first clear statement of intention appeared regarding the preparation for Sporting Legacy in the Plan, highlighting youth and physical activity⁴

The government set out its Olympic objectives:

- making the UK a world-leading sporting nation;
- transforming the heart of East London;
- inspiring a generation of young people to take part in volunteering, cultural and physical activity;
- making the Olympic Park a blueprint for sustainable living; and
- demonstrating that the UK is a creative, inclusive and welcoming place to live in, visit, and for business.

The notional link outlined above, between high levels of investment in elite sport and mass participation has been shown to be deeply flawed, but still persists in the rhetoric of government, in the UK and abroad. Much of the evidence had come from investigations of and before the Sydney Games in 2000, which found very limited impacts on national sport participation from major events and the Olympics in particular, as highlighted by Tony Veal and colleagues.⁵ The basis of these assumptions have been subject to more recent critique, interrogation and challenge – but a lack of evidence did not appear to deflect the Government from its chosen route, before or since.

The Government tied the success of the Games to two key national surveys of sport and engagement in sport and other 'cultural' activity; the *Active People* and *Taking Part* Surveys via the DCMS. The Youth Sport Trust also had a schools based survey designed to capture the impacts of Government strategy in school sport, the targets for which were linked to 2012 legacy, as set out in the 2008 plans.

These surveys address levels of sporting participation and are linked to the (over)ambitious targets set in 2002, as a result of *Game Plan* to increase sport participation by 1 million more, or 1% p.a. increase to 2012. This was later revised to 2million by 2013, then dropped as a target in 2010. The original targets represent an attempt to achieve levels of participation more like Scandinavian countries, which enjoy more equal and healthy populations alongside an elite success rate at least better than the Australians, with a much longer history and commitment to elite investment. Though extensive and expensive national surveys contribute to the evidence base, they do not necessarily address the challenges in increasing participation, in an arguably marginalised grass roots sport community, already struggling to increase capacity, existing largely on voluntary effort and private or voluntary sports clubs. Ultimately, the rhetoric of sport policy makes clear, whether sport is for wider good for sports own sake, any benefits to individuals or society will only flow from more people becoming more actively engaged in sport. Linking sport participation to London 2012 was necessary to be able to claim any increases were due to a legacy impact, rather than a result of longer term efforts to increase sport participation. Earlier documents identified that efforts to create a legacy would not work in isolation however, and relied on "embedding the Olympic message within the mainstream sport infrastructure"⁶. The legacy of opportunity was to extend post games and was thus central and fundamental to the bid and successful outcomes. This 'inspirational' message was significantly influenced by the perceived success, despite a lack of participation data, of the Commonwealth Games in 2002. Legacy in whatever form could be 'leveraged' by specific plans and activities, as they had been from Manchester – the role of Sport England and the other Non –Departmental Public bodies was thus to fulfil these ambitious legacy promises.

The Active People research, which began in 2005, made it possible to identify the extent and context of adult sporting participation and whether this takes place in the club sector, involves receiving coaching or instruction or involves volunteering – all the domain of the National Governing bodies. Through their 'Whole Sport Plans' they were to build participation with over £400million from Sport England and National Lottery funding in the lead up to 2012. This was alongside the approximately £1 bn of Local Authority and National Government funding which already went into supporting community sport each year (Olympics might have refocused but not necessarily increased this). Active People survey also captures evidence of other 'activity' and extent of inactivity in the population. This has continued to reinforce the disconnect with organised sports – as clearly national 'activity' – which might include recreational walking and individual exercise, do not rely on organised, competitive 'sport' – but rather more individual, informal recreational activity.

When the evidence of sport participation in the lead up to 2012 is examined, the results of legacy planning, sport funding to Governing Bodies and Olympic influences are less clear. As the National Audit Office was suggesting in 2010, though plans for Olympics were on time and on budget, linking these funding streams into community sport outputs and outcomes was difficult.⁷ They raised some questions about the delivery of the legacy outcomes in sport participation due to the static or

declining rates in those sports which had received significant amounts of public money for their 'Whole Sport plans'. These were described as overambitious or as Sue Campbell, the former head of UK Sport and ex-Governmental advisor on Sport recently admitted more recently 'pure fiction'.⁸

The policy rhetoric in the lead up to the Games therefore appeared to favour inherent 'inspiration' impact of the Games, but this was not clearly tracked in terms of the specific policy and programmes introduced to build the expected increase in activity, which were to be the Olympic legacy. Government-funded agency plans were developed and funds distributed to projects aiming to 'deliver' rises in participation. But plans and evidence were rather belatedly produced or still not being commissioned, then when Governments and leaderships changed, along with the impacts of economic downturn, priorities and targets were also changed. Local Government also came under significant pressure to reduce their budgets after the spending review in 2010 and non-statutory sport services became an obvious target for cuts – felt particularly hard in the Metropolitan Boroughs in the North, a long way from the Olympic-based developments in Lower Lea Valley and the host London Boroughs.

The Coalition government funded Sport England's £135 million **Places People Play** strategy– still expecting the Governing bodies and their clubs, the Education Sector, Schools and Local Authorities to provide the specific opportunities to grow and extend participation among the non-sporty, and provide better and more satisfying sport to keep those who did take part more engaged for longer. At the same time, with Sport still a non-statutory function of local Government, the spending review in 2010 forced many Local Authorities to cut services and facilities for sport at the grass roots level.

However, despite this the rhetoric of Government in Coalition seemed to be consistent with their predecessors, even if not supporting the same tactics and or targets– the 1million more participants target was quietly dropped, while the School Sport partnerships and School Sport Strategies were rather more loudly and abruptly closed by an announcement by Michael Gove late in 2010⁹. Given the significance of youth in earlier announcements this showed an almost breath-taking disregard of the work of the Education sector and Youth Sport Trust to help achieve the sport targets and the role of youthful sport experience in establishing lifelong sporting participation habits which was well established in the literature. After some outcry, there was a partial reprieve, as funding was provided for School Games Organisers and limited teacher release. However, when '**A Sporting habit for life-**' was published in early 2012¹⁰, an emphasis on competitive sports and traditional team games seemed to signal a disregard for evidence of how to engage the less sporty and in the sorts of recreational activity needed for lifelong habit to be established and appeared to relegate inclusion or 'sport for all' as a priority. The reprieve was only temporary (until 2013) and many coaches, school sport co-ordinators and partnership managers lost their jobs or faced an uncertain future, at the time of writing they still do. This was the same army of Olympic legacy 'champions' which had been working to deliver on the legacy promises and enthuse and mobilise youth across the country.

The Games arrives and reality bites

Though the opening ceremony heralded the official start of the Games, the Olympics actually arrived when the flame landed in May and set the Olympic flame on a journey across the UK – arriving in Chester on 1 of May and Cheshire East a few days later, to an enthusiastic public response, of which I was a tiny part. This was the start of the most incredible summer in the UK and of our experience of the Olympic inspirational impacts.

The public response to the Games in the summer of 2012 showed that enthusiasm for and interest in the Olympics had certainly not been diminished by concerns over access to tickets, security or London being 'ready'. The torch engaged the UK public to such an extent, they were as 'inspired' as they could ever be. The daily torch routes, continuous torch cam broadcasting and evening celebrations on national TV meant that even before the start of the Games, many communities had been touched by the Olympic magic dust and had both expectation and enthusiasm raised for the event itself. By the end of the closing of the Paralympics hardly anyone could have claimed they had not been provided with an inspirational Olympics – as they were clearly a success on every level, regardless of concerns of their long- term legacy.

Unfortunately, as predicted, the immediate impact of the high TV, social media and spectator engagement in the Olympics was unlikely to add to participation or activity levels. This was certainly true on a personal level – via my sportmaking efforts, increasing my own and family cycling activity, encouraging student volunteering and torch relay duties meant I had a relatively active summer – while still not achieving the recommended levels (150 minutes per week) and barely reaching my 3X30 minutes target, along with the majority of the British public. BBC coverage via the red button and iplayer ensured that the lesser known sports were given screen time, invaluable to ensure awareness was optimised so as well as keeping up favourites, audiences were engaged with new and compelling forms as some surprisingly entertaining sports were seen by British audiences of unprecedented size. The level and extent of BBC (free to air) coverage had been as unprecedented as the legacy efforts and the impacts of this will undoubtedly occupy many media analysts in the years to come. The Olympics seemed to inspire a new form of engagement with the Olympics – via social media, people could share their Olympics and follow individual athletes on personal devices even from within the stadia. What the impact on activity levels would be however, is another matter.

The huge response to the Games in the social and broadcast media was clear evidence of the social impact and public engagement in the Olympics but most 'normal life' being suspended (apparently so everyone could watch the Games) any other sport was also impacted – even if people were inspired, it would clearly take some time for long term changes to show, but immediately many clubs or community groups running events were reporting enthusiastic responses and high rates of enquiry – however, all this was evidence only at a descriptive or anecdotal level – as no systematic monitoring was going on by Local or national bodies and is only now emerging in various forms some time later.¹¹ Some LA's reported increased use of facilities, but were not always able to say if these were the people returning more often or new to activity. Increases would have to be significant enough to be captured on the national Active People surveys after the games and somehow be tied to 'exposure' to the Olympics. Sport and Recreation Alliance, published their survey of clubs (completed by a small sample only) just after the Games, which indicated that times were very difficult for some sports and clubs, which meant they had been unable to convert interested newcomers to active participants.¹²

There are however some issues we need to be aware of, as they impact on the potential for inspirational impacts to be shown in participation rates. School Sport was in disarray after Michel Goves' change of policy meant school governing bodies had the 'freedom' to choose or not to provide sporting opportunity and support. This left a patchwork of surviving partnerships and committed local champions to drive through planned activities, while others lost staff, resource and

commitment to fulfil legacy promises. In fact, the Government claimed it had cut the ‘box ticking’ mentality of the previous government, by abolishing the need to complete the school sport survey.

The School Games, brought forward to replace more extensive school sport strategies, was not being evaluated locally, as no resources made available for the delivery of the event could apparently be used to monitor its effectiveness, or evaluate its success or impacts on young people’s activity. This was a £90million, 4 year investment by Government and commercial sponsors, but local delivery was not expected to provide anything other than a measure of the number of schools taking part. Instead, DCMS statistics reported the number of schools (8, 341 in 2011/12 across all levels), represented 3.85million children had access to the School Games, estimated purely on the basis of the number on the school roll.¹³

The Sport England funded Sportivate programme targeting 14-25 year olds with sporting programmes, were proving to be difficult for all but the most organised providers, so new sports programmes, such as those showcased in the Olympics, or participants from more challenging target groups were unlikely to succeed. Participant engagement targets in Sportivate however, were being met or exceeded as those that were running, clearly had their participants targeted correctly, arguably because they were hitting ‘soft’ targets, or proven demand. Even so, it was proving difficult to get the numbers for the evidence that young people had been shown to have gone on to regular sport participation, thus ‘retained’ in the sport, according to the national evaluation¹⁴.

Clearly it was too early for some of the major funded projects to report on long term impacts, so even planned evidence was going to take some time to emerge as local delivery infrastructure was still being constructed, or not working to full capacity. Some clubs, as reported in the Sport and Recreation Alliance research¹⁵ and local research investigations were often not planning for or had limited interest in expanding due to existing pressures of hiring space, lack of coaches or leaders, or running costs and increasing bureaucracy from their governing bodies – all factors which had been pinpointed in the lead up to the games as potential limits to legacy ambitions. In sports with new products and services to promote, such as Hockey, reports of a buoyant start to the year in new members, reported on the England Hockey website, seemed to reflect that Olympics had rekindled the enthusiasm of existing members and reinvigorated the clubs welcoming new juniors- very much as had been expected according to predictions by Mike Weed and colleagues of the ‘demonstration effect’ of the Olympics¹⁶.

So, while enthusiasts for Olympic efforts, LOCOG and the Government (who managed to save a bit from the £9.4 billion costs), were clearly delighted with the Games themselves, the impacts on sport were clearly not going to be easy to disentangle from other policies and impacts and as articles in the press reported there was genuine concern that the careful work to build a legacy of enthusiasm and motivation in young people in particular was being frittered away just at the crucial time to leverage the biggest possible impacts¹⁷.

“my concern is that the potential to marshal that enthusiasm has been lost because the programmes that allowed us to work with young people in schools have withered away” fencing coach, cited in the Guardian 26th Jan 2013¹⁸

Though the Guardian quoted selectively, this was illustrative of many coaches and teachers which reported ‘missed opportunities’ and a frittering away of the impacts of the Games due to lack of

capacity and a sporting infrastructure creaking under the weight of expectations of new participants on already overburdened voluntary clubs and schools.

After the circus left town.....just how has grass roots sport in UK been affected by the Games?

Over and above a resounding confirmation of the power of the 'feelgood' factor, the key successes of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games appear to be in Female sport, Para or disability sport and in strengthening the Elite/High Performance sport system. The picture regarding community or grass roots sport (participation or infrastructure) is far less clear as I have attempted to show above. At the base of the notional sporting pyramid, in sport participation, the Active People data published by Sport England showed only a moderate increase in 2012, as had been the case for the preceding 5 years. Any potential lift to adult participation may appear later but has not been clear at the time of writing. The *Taking Part* report in late 2012, indicated that 15% of 16-24 year olds who had participated in sports in the last 12 months claimed that the UK hosting the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games had motivated them to do more sport, compared with just 9.9% of 25-44 year old sports participants.¹⁹

In terms of impacts on sport participation data, unfortunately, beyond an impression of greater interest and some specific national programmes reporting positive results, national and local Active People data for 2013 will not be published until well after the writing and publication of this book. Initial signs are not too convincing that there will be a surge of participation to come based on the expected drop from youth to adult sport, which essentially the Olympics has had little impact on. Local Government, Sport and Recreation Alliance, and other agencies are reporting mixed results early 2013, in terms of increased enquiries, and evidence of an 'inspirational' impact in young people, whilst also reporting a lack of capacity in mainstream sport, closures and some lack of progress on converting interest to new members or participants.

But while for example, Active Women projects have reported achieving in line with targets for recruiting, these projects were *designed* to increase participation in non-sporty women or inactive communities – so not due to any simple 'Olympic' association, but the specific methods and approaches of the project, to target and provide opportunities in new and interesting ways and in clearly defined project areas. These will only result in short term or pockets of growth unless adopted into mainstream sporting provision in the UK and sustained in the future – we need to see significant increases in young women being more active, engaging in a wider range of activity and progressing in larger numbers to regular lifelong activity over the long term. Arguably, such changes will take 7-10 years to be seen despite the millions invested in order to demonstrate population level increases. Rather than the 1% or 1 million per annum more participants rise since 2005, there have been only 1.6million more participants *overall* since 2005/6 – in the Olympic year, this was 750,000 more people than the previous year. Clearly the multiple and complex motivations for youth to engage and for adults to stay with sport mean that we will need to watch carefully in the future, whether participation will rise as the 'inspired' generation move into adulthood. But any inherent impact on sport participation by a successful Olympics could clearly not be taken for granted and there is very limited potential for increased participation being attributed to success at elite level in terms of medal winners.

The good news is however that the gender gap appears to be narrowing – with only 29.8% of women meeting the 1X30 target in 2005/6, compared with 31.1% in 2012. Similar gains in those with a disability indicate small levels of growth but at least moving in the right direction – from 17.7% to 18.3% since 2005/6. But these are small gains and levels of activity are still well below guidelines for health. Effectively Active People shows that overall the population playing sport or being ‘active’ is increasing but that the increases are not really based in the sports which received many millions over that period or were seen in the Olympics. The impacts are most likely in those already interested in sport, if not particularly active. But levels of activity remain stubbornly low, particularly in lower socio-economic groups and levels of sedentary behaviour or inactivity are still of great concern to the health lobby. So though there are some ‘winners’ – in sports such as cycling, Athletics or Swimming – this is by the survey counting all individual/informal activity, ie nothing likely to be influenced by Governing Body activity and millions of pounds of funding. Many of the more ‘club-based’ sports, such as Golf, football or badminton have actually shown ‘no change’ overall in the national surveys or declined. The sport of Netball has shown an increase of 47,000 participants since 2005/6, buoyed by the success of the Back to Netball programme and despite not being an Olympic sport! However females are still more likely to be the most inactive in the adult population and young females in particular, despite the many who do take part, remain a major concern. I haven’t touched on the issue of disadvantage and disability compounding gender imbalances, neither of which are likely to report big increases by the time of the next Active People survey. The issues impacting on Para/disability sport are similarly complex and difficult to see clearly in national surveys. Though the Charity Street Games has charted their success in delivering sport opportunities across deprived communities using their ‘doorstep sport’ approach, this is being delivered in pockets and projects rather than through mainstream or systematic changes in sport.²⁰ The Olympic legacy promises have effectively been difficult to deliver, as resources have not necessarily been invested into those areas most in need and other impacts like the ‘austerity’ budgets for Local Government have hampered grass roots growth in sports that rely on council facilities and services.

In 2013 UK Sport effectively concluded no ‘trickle down’ could justify continued investment in sports like Handball, Volleyball and Basketball up to Rio 2016. Overall the funds devoted to elite sport cemented UK Sports ‘no compromise’ management philosophy and instead made it imperative for sports seeking public funding that they demonstrated they were capable of success internationally, demonstrated the UK was ‘world-leading sporting nation’ through meeting or in some sports, exceeding the medal targets. Sport England made similar decisions regarding the public funds to participation sports and the Governing Bodies. London was particularly important as female elite athletes formed a major part of the success on the medal table and this may yet help to boost female sport more effectively through increased media attention and public support or recognition. But, as the data seems to show this is not yet happening as these media impacts are not translating into real growth. It might be that the females who would otherwise have dropped out of sport by adulthood are now more likely to be retained in recreational activity and the ‘back to...’ projects, but Active People doesn’t track participation longitudinally in order to evidence this. Instead we will need to rely on the Governing Bodies and targeted programmes to report any such growth in the future.

So, despite all the positive signs of inspirational performances and motivation in young people being increased, I must concur with Keech who suggested:

‘with far less resources, an emphasis on competition...it seems unlikely that London 2012 will come close to keeping its legacy promise. No amount of political blame and counter-blame will shield the fact that for young people, sadly London 2012 looks likely to be a missed opportunity and once the circus has left town, who will be there to clear up the mess after the elephants?’²¹

While the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park may yet be home to several large white elephants, we will undoubtedly be in a better place to be able to measure the reality of the inspirational impacts on grass roots sport in about 5 years time, provided we have the collection of reliable participation and other relevant data. London clearly has most to gain from the hard legacy in facilities, but across the UK the ‘soft’ legacy in people including thousands of Young Ambassadors, Legacy leaders or Sport Makers will have graduated to adult participants or sport leaders, professional sport administrators and club volunteers – and the impacts on people are much harder to measure.

The passage of time, so important in the notion of legacy as inheritance, should have allowed for any ‘trickle down’ into grass roots participation or demonstration impact from elite sport to be seen in newly motivated young people and new sporting participants. However, it remains to be seen whether any useful lessons can be learned on *how* any legacy in sport has been inherited and *who by*. Unfortunately the time to make good any deficiencies will have passed and the ‘once in a lifetime opportunity’ will have moved on to other countries and communities to plan for and get excited about. For academics however this is all good news as it makes clear that our work will be fuelled by legacy debates for the foreseeable future. Essentially, despite the opportunity it presented, delivering an inspirational and successful Olympics/Paralympics was not sufficient to get more people taking part in sport, as many had already predicted. Nevertheless, sport in the UK has undoubtedly been changed by this cycle of planning, investment and preparation, with the unprecedented effort to capitalise on the inspirational impacts from the home Games. There are clearly many still committed to ensuring that over time, we may yet see the legacy of London in more and better sport, particularly for young people.

Word Count:5172

Endnotes

¹ Sportmakers was the official sport volunteering project of Sport England, aimed at harnessing Olympic enthusiasm to increase volunteering and leadership in communities.

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